

**Parking Subcommittee
Concept Paper
December 15, 2005**

Issue Statement

In an auto-dominated region knit together by freeways and major thoroughfares, there are few convenient opportunities for people to go from place to place by walking or by public transportation. Since the auto is currently the dominant means of choice in the Houston region (whether by default or not), at each destination point in a trip, there must be appropriate provisions made for parking—on street or off-street, on grade or in a garage. The efforts that are currently underway to create specific transit and pedestrian-oriented corridors and centers enable alternate parking solutions to be considered for these locations.

Minimum off-street parking requirements for single-family development were set out in Chapter 42 – two spaces for each dwelling unit in 1982. It was not until 1989 that the city established specific off-street parking requirements in Chapter 26 for a wide range of other uses. Since that time a few changes have been made in city.

Provisions in the ordinance allow for variances from the parking requirements. Over the past 16 years, billions of dollars in new development have been spent in Houston but only a handful of parking variances have been requested. Is that because the ordinance requirements are near perfect or is it that the market requirements exceed city minimums so there is no issue? If response is solely due to the market, is there a hidden and long-term public cost that the taxpayer may not want to pay or should not pay? There is an obvious relationship between parking, economic development, and mobility. Too much economic development with too much parking can overtax the capacity of a street system, producing gridlock and potential economic stagnation.

In recent years, changing development patterns, most notably towards higher density development, have caused a number of parking related issues to surface. Very high density employment centers such as the Texas Medical Center, where increased parking capacity will overburden the roads that feed into and through the TMC, is one such issue. Another is that current parking requirements may prohibit transit-oriented development along guided rapid transit corridors and at station areas. Another serious issue that many Houstonians grapple with daily is lack of adequate parking in some neighborhoods, for both residents and guests, particularly in older areas where infill development at higher densities is occurring.

Philosophy and Guiding Principles

Committee participants represented a range of interests including neighborhoods, commercial development, housing developers, quasi public institutions and the Texas Medical Center. Issues discussed over the past six months include lack of curb space for on-street parking, spill-over parking when commercial establishments and institutions do not provide adequate parking for patrons, what impact, if any, parking requirements have on transit-oriented/mixed-use development (and vice versa), and how parking requirements affect roadway capacity in the highly developed Medical Center area.

While members agreed that certain tools are needed to mitigate issues in very specific situations, these tools must be tailored to the specific districts for which they would

apply. And, great care should be taken to consider any unintended impacts on adjacent areas that may result if such measures are implemented.

Recommendations for the Texas Medical Center

Continued growth in the Medical Center area and the need for structured parking facilities is straining capacity of the area's roadway system. The combination of the TMC's location along Main and Fannin Streets, two primary north-south arteries connecting the Reliant Park area with Downtown, and increasing development within TMC boundaries is resulting in daily gridlock. Of 65,000 TMC employees, only about 10% are currently using public transit to get to work.

The TMC is working to address these issues internally but growing clinic and research needs pose new challenges. Those challenges include finding funds to pay for parking facilities, people movers, and mechanisms to identify and implement integrated parking solutions for the TMC area. One major constraint is that current law does not permit Texas Medical Center to exercise control over privately financed facilities and land in the area.

The Committee recommends that Planning Commission study the following actions to determine the consequences and feasibility of:

- Expanding the Texas Medical Center Parking Management Area (PMA) to include new properties and require traffic studies for proposed development locating in congested areas within the PMA boundaries.
- Establishing a maximum parking ratio, or ceiling, for congested areas within the Texas Medical Center PMA, while ensuring that overflow parking will not impact neighboring communities and commercial establishments.
- Encouraging partnerships with City, County, and Metro to build remote structured parking facilities at strategic points along the Main Street rail line to serve Texas Medical Center area.

Decal Parking Program

The City's Decal Parking Program has been successful in relieving overflow parking problems in a number of Houston's urban neighborhoods. With some minor improvements, this program will better meet the needs of residential communities and the commercial establishments located within them. The Committee recommends that Planning Commission request the Planning Department and Legal Department implement the following suggestions:

- Notification of Decal Parking application should be mailed to both owners and tenants of properties within 200 feet of the decal parking area. (*Note: this recommendation has already been implemented*).
- Special Events Permits. One day, special event permits should be given to residents upon request. Special events include weddings, receptions, funerals and parties. Request forms would be available on line and could be faxed to Parking Management staff for review and processing. Temporary, one-day passes with specific times would be issued.
- Contractor/Builder Permits. These would be provided free of charge by the week or month to contractors building or remodeling homes on blocks where Decal Parking is implemented.

Guest Parking

As density increases in both urban and suburban residential neighborhoods, on-street and off-street guest parking is becoming scarce. This condition is often exacerbated when infrastructure in older neighborhoods is not adequate, such as narrow pavement on streets and open ditch drainage. Multiple driveways and wide driveways also add to the problem. Chapter 42 does not require guest parking for residential infill. On the other side of the coin, developers wish to maximize their lot yield. Some developers who have provided guest parking in the past say that these spots often go unused or are used long term by homeowners who, for a variety of reasons, choose not to park in their own driveways or garages.

Parking on public streets and private streets are two issues that must be dealt with separately. While participants agree that something needs to be done, more discussion is needed to determine the best solutions. The Committee recommends that Planning Commission establish a committee made up of all affected stakeholders to further examine these issues and identify possible solutions. Though not exhaustive, the following list suggests ideas for further study.

- Establish incentives for developers including, reduced residential setbacks, combining parking with compensating open space and detention, allow on-street parking only during certain hours.
- Encourage single entry driveways that flare to two spaces just before the garage (allows more curb space for parking).
- Encourage shared driveway entrances.
- Re-institute paving assessment program to bring streets to standards (replace open ditch drainage with curb and gutter, widen pavement).
- Anticipate the need for neighborhood parking lots.

The Committee recognizes that this issue is also being reviewed by the Development Impacts Committees so recommendations arising from that Committee's work should be considered in concert.

Parking on Commercial/Transit Corridors

Recently, retail and mixed use projects proposed in the Main Street corridor have requested reduced parking based on the proximity to light rail stations. These urban, pedestrian oriented projects are being encouraged by a number of entities and they conform to the City and County sponsored Main Street Corridor Master Plan. However, little data, if any, is available to substantiate arguments in favor of granting variances in for reduced parking. Concerns expressed by neighboring property owners and others in high density commercial areas include the unintended consequences of granting such variances incrementally, overflow parking that spills onto adjacent properties and the possibility of establishing a retail environment that is certain to fail. The Committee believes that without more empirical data, recommendations for reduced parking ratios on transit lines cannot be made.

The City of Dallas recently initiated a comprehensive parking study with a special emphasis on high capacity transit corridors that will examine parking ratios, peak use times, mixed use concepts, vacant land and joint development of parking structures. In addition to watching closely the outcomes of the Dallas study, the Planning Commission should look closely at the appropriateness of established parking ratios in select high-

capacity transit station areas (light rail or bus rapid transit). In addition, the Committee feels strongly that circumstances vary from one area to the next and that any changes in established parking ratios must be considered on a case by case basis. Special attention must be given to identifying all possible consequences of implementing such changes. Reductions in parking ratios should not be granted if the effect of such change would result in overflow parking in the nearby commercial district or residential neighborhoods.

In addition, the Committee recommends that Planning Commission further study two concepts:

- Parking grids based on need. Some areas may have a ceiling and some areas may have alternative parking ratios (reductions in parking ratios should not be granted if the effect of such change would result in overflow parking in the nearby commercial district or residential neighborhoods).
- Public/private partnerships to develop parking structures at strategic locations along high capacity transit corridors, such as Main Street.
- Other appropriate parking requirements on specific corridors served by high capacity (guided) transit.